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ABSTRACT

The position of economics in the Oklahoma high school curriculum is a precarious one. Many of the assumptions that university economists hold about economics education in high schools are wrong. Economics, where it does exist in the high school curriculum, means not only scientific, policy-relevant economics, but also consumer education and career education. Including university economists in teacher education has proved more difficult than anticipated and there are difficulties in deciding how to teach such courses. Two conditions explain the state of economics education in Oklahoma. First, the subject requires teachers with strong economics backgrounds, a requirement which few teachers can meet. Second, high school history and social science courses are often dumping grounds for coaches who know full well that teaching quality is not a criterion for success. Despite the overall situation, however, there are promising programs such as the "Strategies Guide for High School Economics Courses" and the Junior Achievement organization's text for grades 11 and 12, "Applied Economics." (IS)

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FINISHING THE JOB: THE QUESTIONABLE PROSPECTS FOR HIGH SCHOOL ECONOMICS

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This is not a research paper. Rather, it is a very personal exposition by one who has recently become a part of the world of economic education. Aside from the shock of assuming the position of center director and state council executive vice president, my biggest shock in economic education was the realization that high school economics courses are few and far between, and that, at least in Oklahoma, economic education was in a much healthier state at the elementary and junior high school levels. Thus my concerns over the entire economic education curricula tend to flow from my concern over the relative lack of a good "capstone" treatment at the high school level.

I must admit at the outset that, after a year and a half in my current position, I have become increasingly sensitive to the fact that I am a professional economist rather than a professional educator. I have long been critical of johnny-come-lately university administrators who rise to positions of high authority without ever having done journeyman work at the department level. Yet I am very much in that same position; I have never taken

an education course, and I have never taught in the school system. Thus I admit at the outset that it is presumptious of me to make pronouncements about curriculum.

Assumptions on Entering the World of Economic Education

Prior to taking my current position, I had occasionally appeared on economic education programs--usually to talk about my fields of special interest. I had only a vague idea of what was going on in economic education. I knew that on occasion, economic education received a good deal of publicity, and I knew that the state council organization had been around a long time--at least since I first joined our university's faculty in 1960.

When I was involved in departmental curriculum considerations, I recall that we often discussed the need for a capstone course for undergraduates. We never instituted such a course, and I suspect that I might be less sympathetic with such a proposal today than in the past (that is, unless I could design the course). But it certainly sounded like a good idea.

With my academic economics biases, and a sense that economics is not an easy subject, I assumed that rational curriculum development would place heavy emphasis on high school economics courses. In effect, my view was that economics is not "kids' stuff." Why, I thought, should not graduates of a high school economics course be able to test out of at least one of our college principles courses?

There are some other assumptions which I made about economic education, which were at least partially incorrect.

I had assumed that economic education involved the discipline of economics as I roughly understood its boundaries. Here, I am pleased to say, I was certainly more than 60 percent correct. Yet there is a continuous tendency for economic education to turn out to be all things to all people. I'm afraid that the Joint Council's approach doesn't help much. That organization's tripartite definition seems to encompass everything from consumer education to career education to the scientific policy-relevant economics which I take to be heart of the discipline. This, by the way, means that some high school economics courses turn out to be principally consumer economics.

Another assumption which I held related to the primacy of the economic education "network" in the area of delivering economic education services. My exposure to the Junior Achievement system immediately disabused me of this assumption.

Support from the education "establishment" was another assumption which does not test out completely. We have thirty-two cooperating school systems in Oklahoma. These include most of the largest systems, and we generally see these systems making productive efforts in economic education. And the State Department of Education provides financial assistance to the Oklahoma Council, and publishes a state economic education curriculum guide. I knew that the Oklahoma Legislature passed

legislation in 1974 requiring economic education to be integrated into the school curriculum. What I did not know when I assumed my current position in August 1982 was that a few months earlier, the Legislature abolished the mandatory inclusion of economics in the curriculum. This was accomplished as part of a "basic education" bill which also removed such other academic disciplines as cardio pulmonary resuscitation from the required curriculum. Obviously, part of the education establishment was glad to get rid of the economic education requirement.

In addition, I assumed there were great opportunities for expanding the role of my fellow academic economists from institutions throughout the state in economic education work. While we <u>are</u> trying to expand this involvement, I am certainly less idealistic about this than I was eighteen months ago. The economics that we teach to teachers is usually pretty weak broth. Some of my colleagues can put on a very good show and teachers in workshops find them stimulating. In general, however, I am a bit embarrassed at the thought of requesting competent specialists to offer presentations at extremely elementary levels. This embarrassment is enhanced by my need to pay for their services.

Finally, I assumed that researchers in the field of economic education had worked through the problem of what to teach when. (I have later learned that this is called the issue of "scope and sequence" which, along with "behavioral objectives" has been a major general topic of discussion in

education.) Yet among all the excellent material published by the Joint Council, this matter is not treated explicitly--although such work has been accomplished elsewhere. [1] If it were, it seems to me that the general absence of real high school economics courses would appear as a kind of curricular Achilles' heel. In my weaker moments, it seems to me that the current watering down of the old Developmental Economic Education Program into DEEP Type I and DEEP Type II arrangements is really a retreat from emphasis on an integrated, articulated curriculum. I am sure this is a misinterpretation. (At the very least, I wish the leaders in economic education had taken the occasion of rethinking DEEP as an opportunity for getting rid of that horrid acronym.)

Why the Weakness in High School Economics?

Aside from failure of council and center directors to do an adequate promotional job, why have economics courses not become more prominent in high school curricula? Several reasons come to mind, some of which are not particularly flattering.

First, a decent high school economics course requires a teacher who has more than a casual interest and background in the discipline. College education requirements in the

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[1] Ohio University, Center for Educational Service," Ohio Economic Education Scope and Sequence Chart," n.d.

social sciences may treat economics only as an option. In a way, there is a curricular Catch 22 operating. More economics is not required because it is seldom taught--in comparison with civics and history. Yet more economics is not taught because teachers are not prepared.

Second, it is widely known--almost to the extent of scandal--that high school history and social science courses are often the dumping ground for the high school coaching staff. Last year, there were only five such teachers in the entire Oklahoma City school district who did not also have coaching responsibilities.

I know that there are coaches who are also good teachers. Only last year, for example, the basketball coach at Pleasant Grove High School in Oklahoma was elected "Teacher of the Year." However, his contract was not renewed because of a losing season.

I submit that the rote memorization based on chronology in history, or based on maps in geography, provides a much easier teaching task for a coach who knows full well that teaching quality is not a criterion for success. For larger schools, it seems to me that every effort should be made to separate coaching duties from teaching in the academic disciplines. The impossibility of doing this in small schools may be the best reason I can think of for school consolidation.

It is doubtful that lack of good teaching materials per se is a cause for the paucity of high school economics. The fact that there are probably at least half a dozen attractive

texts suggests that there is a market of some substance. Yet packaging and promotion may be a problem. Two current developments promise improved packaging, and certainly increased effort at delivery.

New Materials and Brighter Prospects

The preparation of Strategies Guide for High School Economics Courses is currently underway under the direction of John Morton.[2] Preliminary material from this indicates that it will be a thoughtful and thorough resource for the development of high school economics courses. As is the case with other "master curriculum guides," it will be ideal for the highly motivated, intellectually competent teacher. Hopefully,its availability will lead good social science teachers to introduce economics courses. However, the guide will not solve all of the barriers discussed above. During football season, it is doubtful that "coach" will have either the time or motivation to work with this material.

Another promising effort at high school economics is the Junior Achievement organization's new text for grades 11 and 12 entitled Applied Economics. [3] This is a slick publication which contains a good deal of economics in

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[2] Master Curriculum Guide in Economics for the Nation's Schools, Strategies for Teaching High School Economics, Draft Manuscript, January 1984.

[3] Applied Economics, Junior Achievement, Inc., 1982

addition to introductory business principles. In many communities, the Junior Achievement organization has a good deal of influence, and the Applied Economics program could be just what is needed to pry open high school curricula for a dose of economics. Hopefully, this might extend to broadening the focus beyond the specific Junior Achievement materials.

Conclusion

As I said at the outset, I am such a newcomer to the "movement" that is is presumptious of me to comment on a matter as weighty as this. In fact, there is the possibility that those taking high school economics courses might actually do worse than average in college conomics principles. Such courses might attract inferior students. Moreover, the students might be confused or full of erroneous information after a high school course [4]. Even so, the challenge remains to attract better students, provide better instruction and materials, and to increase the extent of such offerings.

. John Palmer, Goeffrey Carliner, and Thomas Romer, "Does High School Economics Help?" The Journal of Economic Education, Spring 1979, pp. 58-61